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SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE ANNOUNCES MEMBERS OF NEW MEDIA COMMISSION

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) The GOZ has named members of the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC), a regulatory body that will receive and process applications for media publishing licenses. Media groups view this development as an opportunity to democratize the media environment in Zimbabwe. However, they question the independence of the regulatory body and have expressed fears that the ZMC might be paralyzed by the diametrically opposed viewpoints of the commissioners. Appointments to the other three new constitutional commissions -- electoral, human rights, and anti-corruption -- have yet to be either fully disclosed or determined. END SUMMARY.

Media Commission a Product of Compromise

¶2. (U) On December 23, 2009, at a joint press conference, President Robert Mugabe and Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai named Godfrey Majonga as chairman and Ngobile Nyathi as deputy chair of the newly constituted Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC). Other members of the nine-member commission are Henry Muradzika, Matthew Takaona, Millicent Mombeshora, Chris Mhike, Chris Mutsvangwa, Miriam Madziwa and Lawton Hikwa. The Commission will receive and process applications for publishing licenses and other functions as directed by Parliament.

¶3. (SBU) Majonga is currently Deputy Director of Danhiko Project, a Harare-based NGO focused on delivering benefits to disabled Zimbabweans. First Lady Grace Mugabe serves as Danhiko's patron and her visits to the center have been extensively covered by the local media. Little is known about Majonga's predisposition in terms of media freedom issues except that he worked as a TV presenter for the state-controlled monopoly broadcaster, Zimbabwe Broadcasting

Corporation (ZBC). ZBC is known for its positive coverage of ZANU-PF. It is likely that Majonga, along with former ZBC Chief Executive Officer Muradzikwa, Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe Divisional Head Mombeshora, former diplomat Mutsvangwa and National University of Science and Technology (NUST) Dean Hikwa, all favor ZANU-PF.

¶4. (SBU) Deputy Chairperson, Ngobile Nyathi is a media lecturer at NUST and reports to Hikwa. She was previously editor of the Daily News when it was shut down in 2003 by the now defunct Media and Information Commission (MIC). She also worked for the Financial Gazette, before it transferred ownership to Reserve Bank Governor Gideon Gono in 2003. Along with media lawyer Chris Mhike and journalist Miriam Madziwa, Nyathi is seen as a reform-minded individual with vast knowledge of the journalism profession. She is close to Deputy Prime Minister Thokozani Khupe and sources at NUST say she has authored several speeches for her.

¶5. (SBU) Takaona, who served for ten years as President of the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ), and Hikwa, an IV Alum (2000), have worked in the government-controlled QAlum (2000), have worked in the government-controlled Zimbabwe Newspapers Group, publishers of the only dailies in the country (the Herald and the Chronicle), as journalist and board member respectively. They supported government actions against independent media, including defending the legality of the MIC when it was challenged by independent media journalists. ZUJ President Takaona campaigned for media reform and was part of initiatives to form a self-regulatory

HARARE 00000044 002 OF 003

body, the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe (VMCZ), but he also, in stepping down as President, participated in anti-democratic ZUJ elections that assured him a continued role as consultant to the Union. Hikwa's resignation from the Zimpapers board has never been explained publicly and was viewed by some as an act of independence; however, he is close to Mugabe's spokesperson, George Charamba, and is said to be a defender of ZA NU-PF policies.

Free Media Advocates Prepare for Disappointment

¶6. (U) In a statement released January 15, leading media advocacy group, the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) said the commission was "a potential vehicle to democratize the media, long shackled by political controls." MISA was skeptical, however, of the independence of the new media regulatory body to promote diverse and plural media. MISA said ZMC would operate under the very same repressive legal instruments that had decimated the private media and hindered the proliferation of alternative sources of information. Andrew Moyse, head of independent media monitoring group, Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe (MMPZ), was quoted in the media saying the ZMC "might be paralyzed by the diametrically opposing viewpoints of the commissioners. The ZANU-PF elements in the commission will resist reform. It is a bit of a mixed bag, but we understand because this is a product of heavy compromises everywhere."

¶7. (SBU) There has been little information about when the ZMC will begin receiving and processing applications for licenses from prospective publishers. Deputy Minister of Media, Information, and Publicity Jameson Timba said there were still a few issues that had to be addressed before the commission begins its work. He said the ZMC was already defined in terms of the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and therefore did not need any law to formalize its operations. There is no provision requiring the taking of oaths -- whether in the Constitution or in the relevant Act -- for the new commissioners. Mutsvangwa reportedly told a meeting convened by the Dutch Embassy that all the ZMC required to begin its work was an official

publication in the Government Gazette formally announcing the commissioners. Takaona and Mhike said they still have not received formal communication from the government regarding their appointment to the ZMC on January 20.

Other Commissions Not Yet Completed

18. (SBU) The three other constitutionally-mandated commissions have lagged behind the ZMC in terms of appointments. The government has announced commission members for the electoral commission and human rights commission, but has not disclosed who will chair and deputy these commissions.
Qthese commissions.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) With the announcement of the ZMC, organizations such as the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ), publishers of the banned Daily News, and the Zimind Publishers -- which has announced plans for a daily newspaper -- have some hope that their publications will be licensed.

HARARE 00000044 003 OF 003

But questions remain as to how independent the ZMC will be, and AIPPA poses a continuing threat to press freedoms. There are high hopes for enhanced press freedom under the new media commission, but we will wait to see how events develop before drawing conclusions. END COMMENT.

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